

**Opening Statement of Chairman Dave Reichert
Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Science and Technology Committee of
Homeland Security**

Hearing on “The State of Interoperable Communications: Perspectives from the Field”

**Wednesday, February 15, 2006 at 10:00 a.m.
311 Cannon House Office Building**

Good morning. Let me first welcome our distinguished panel and thank you all for being here today to share your thoughts on an issue of great personal and professional importance to me – the problem of achieving and maintaining interoperable emergency communications.

I'd like to be blunt here. It is intolerable to me that our Nation's law enforcement, fire service, and emergency medical services personnel still confront many of the same emergency communication problems that I did as a rookie cop more than 34 years ago. It is intolerable to me that -- even with the rapid pace of technological innovation and the vast amounts of money dedicated to improving emergency communications -- our Nation's first responders still experience difficulty communicating with one another, on demand, in real time, when needed.

Until the events of September 11, 2001, many people just simply assumed that first responders from different disciplines and jurisdictions could communicate with one another. Unfortunately, that was the not case then. And, as demonstrated by the inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina, that is not the case even now. The inability of police, fire, emergency medical services, public works, utilities, and health care workers to communicate with one another effectively may have lead to the loss of many lives in New Orleans and the Gulf States.

The status quo is unacceptable.

Our local police, fire, and emergency medical service professions are our Nation's first line of prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. And effective communication is absolutely essential to their mounting a well-coordinated response – whether manmade or natural.

Indeed, first responders and Federal, State, and local officials cannot establish meaningful command and control in the absence of a functioning communications system. Without the ability to receive timely reports from the field, the Incident Commander may have difficulty establishing situational awareness. Without the ability to issue instructions to first responders in the field, the Operations Chief cannot direct resources and personnel to areas of most need. And without the ability to call for help, citizens cannot reliably seek medical and other emergency assistance.

In other words, effective communications is essential for the right people to make the right decisions at the right time. That message is worth repeating... to mount an effective emergency response requires timely and accurate information, so that the right people may make the right decisions at the right time.

As I previously said, I have a firsthand understanding of, experience with, and appreciation for this problem. Suffice it to say, I have faced the perils of life and death decision-making. As Sheriff of King County in Seattle, Washington, I provided the safest possible environment for those that served my office. But, sadly, inadequate emergency communications sometimes stood in my way.

For example, the regional radio communication system, which served all 39 governments in my county, suffered terrible interference. The proliferation of cell phone towers overpowered and disrupted my deputies' ability to receive their signal, thus jeopardizing their safety.

As Sheriff, I took immediate remedial action to redress that particular situation. But now, as a Member of Congress and Chairman of this Subcommittee, I have a forum through which I intend to solve the larger communication problem.

While the recently enacted Deficit Reduction Act included a necessary initial step of freeing up much needed spectrum and established a new \$1 billion interoperable grant program, interoperable communications is about much more than just spectrum and money. It is about the need for strong leadership, effective coordination, and adequate planning.

Today is the first in a series of four scheduled hearings to highlight the issues and perspectives of various experts, such as yourselves. Your perspective is especially important to us: you are the ones who serve on the front lines, where "the proverbial rubber meets the road."

In the three successive hearings, this Subcommittee will hear the perspectives of State and local government officials, Federal officials who administer interoperability grant programs and other activities, and experts in the field of emergency communications technology.

Again, I want to again thank the witnesses for their testimony today. The Chair now recognizes the Ranking Minority Member of the Subcommittee, the Gentleman from New Jersey, Mr. Pascrell, for any statement he may have.